



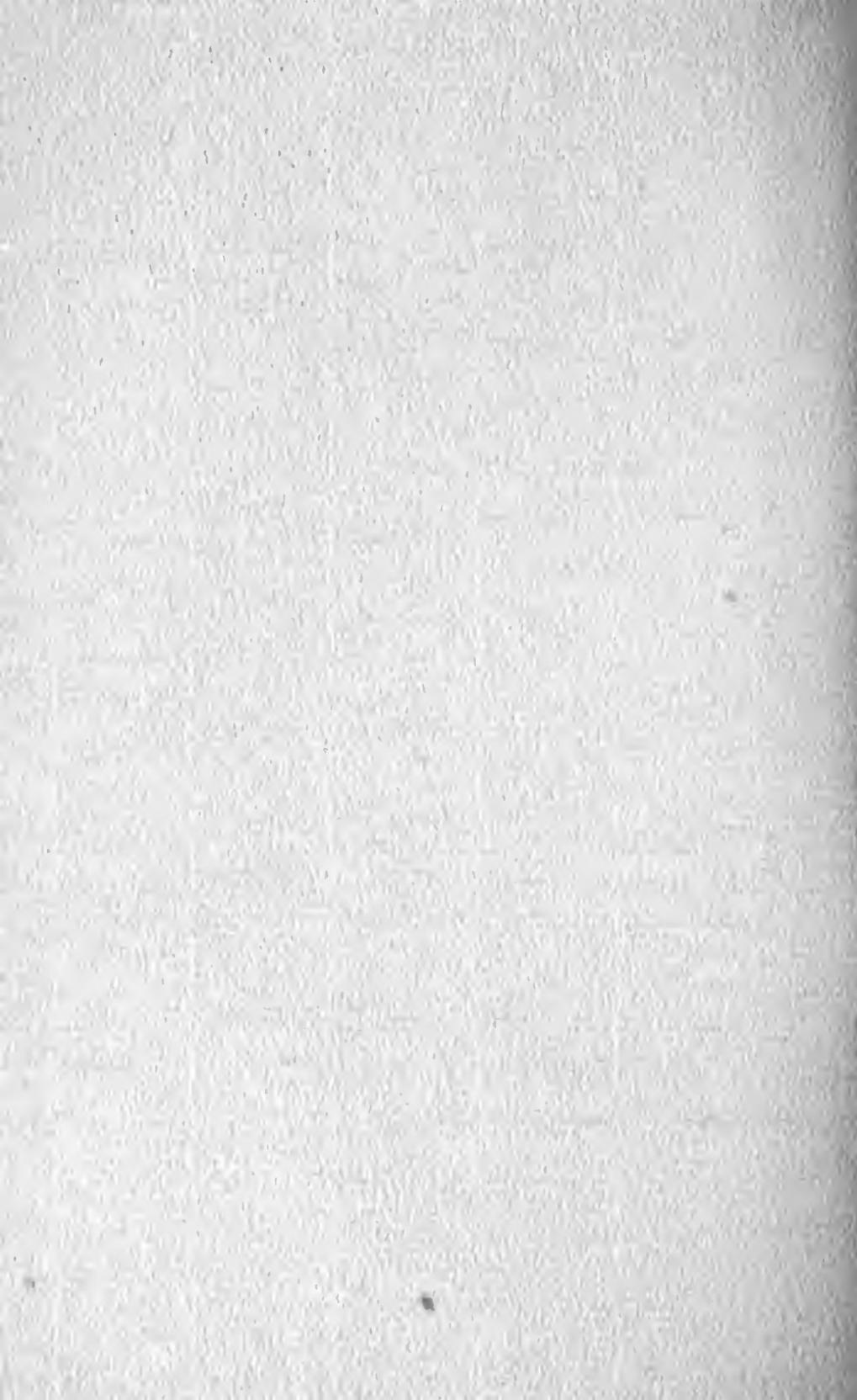
*Four*  
Quarters

VOL. XXIII

No. 2

WINTER 1974

75 CENTS





# Four Quarters

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY THE FACULTY OF LA SALLE COLLEGE  
PHILA., PA. 19141

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Published quarterly in Autumn, Winter, Spring, Summer by the faculty of La Salle College, 20th & Olney Aves., Phila., Pa. 19141. Subscriptions: \$3.00 annually, \$5.00 for two years. © 1973 by La Salle College. Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope. Available in Microform from Xerox University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, Mich., 48106. Second class postage paid at Philadelphia, Pa.

# Marginalia . . .

## IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

*This being the anointed month for end of the year round-ups, predictions for the new year, and reflections on the state of the nation, I bring you tidings of great gloom.*

*Perhaps you began to suspect all was not well for 1974 when you hopped out of bed in your icy room this morning and wondered whether you'd be able to find a gas station open to feed the gas-eating goliath you purchased while you were still a believer in inevitable progress.*

*You did read the calendar right, however; it is 1974, however much it may smack of 1984. But for a whole generation of Americans under forty, there must be a tendency to echo Sinclair Lewis's words, "It can't happen here." Lewis of course was talking about fascism, and it is likely that we are less close to fascism in 1974 than we were in 1973 when Haldeman and Erlichman were in the White House. What "can't happen here," but currently is, is a world in which our habitual creature comforts are not quite so habitual any more.*

*All arguments about the legitimacy of the energy crisis aside, 1974 promises to be a year in which Americans are going to have to take a close look at some assumptions and customs which we have long taken for granted. And, though I am enough of a depression baby not to join those who make ridiculous statements like, "what this country needs is another depression," I do think that a light touch of adversity is not all bad. We are in danger of suffering the fate of the man who fell in a vat of cold cream and softened to death. (I have been saving that line since I learned it in the school yard in the third grade.)*

*For far too many years now, we have been living as though our material resources were infinite. Too many cars? Simple. Build more highways. After we have completely paved Delaware and Connecticut, we move on to New Jersey. Crop surpluses? We simply pay the farmers not to farm. Heller's absurd world of Catch-22 is fast being outdistanced by the reality of the American kitchen, where energy is used to cook the food, more energy to freeze it, then a microwave oven to defrost and cook it again. The cycle is then completed when the whole mess is thrown into the trashmaster which converts ten pounds of trash into . . . right! Ten pounds of trash—but neater trash.*

*(Continued on Page 47)*

# The Plasterer

STEVEN ALLABACK

**R**OBERT COULD have been on the deck of a schooner that Saturday morning, grasping the main sheet, looking to windward, ready to spring into action, but instead he was sitting on a cracked leather seat, watching his father wrestle with the steering wheel of the old truck. A line of traffic was behind them. Drivers honked and shook their heads. Every mile or so the truck swerved out to the shoulder and kicked up dust while Robert's father motioned cars by, his arm moving in a wide sweep, like he was directing an advancing army.

"Pass, you bastards," Mr. Porter muttered.

Robert giggled uncertainly. For as long as he could remember, his father not only tried to avoid upsetting people but was especially apologetic if his work, his plastering, caused others inconvenience. Today the old man seemed unusually cheerful, ominously daring.

"Up yours," he shouted gaily to an Oldsmobile driver who had lightly tapped his horn several times while accelerating past.

Actually, Robert suddenly noticed with amusement, if you saw him from the right angle, that tanned weatherbeaten skin and those bushy grey eyebrows made his father look less like a plasterer than a handsome yachtsman at the helm. At this very moment, a hundred miles north at the mouth of Santa Barbara harbor, the skipper would probably be leaning over the wheel to shout: "Keep a sharp eye, now," while the crew would be feeling brave about a channel crossing in the fog. Tourists on the dock would have stared enviously as they cast off.

But here, behind the smoke-spewing rattletrap, annoyed drivers were cursing them, making remarks. The truck was newly painted, obviously with a brush, and there was a sign: WHEN YOU BUILD OR BUY, KNOCK ON THE WALL, DEMAND GENUINE LATH AND PLASTER. Robert hated

to imagine how they looked: scaffolding piled high, mortar boxes and gasoline can clanking together, darbies and featheredges jutting skyward.

Mr. Porter reached over to slap Robert on the knee. "It's been a while, hasn't it son?"

"Sure has."

Last evening after dinner, leaning back in a kitchen chair and smoking a small cigar, he watched his parents react to the stories he told about the fashionable people he had met that summer. Suddenly his father had interrupted:

"Robbie, I'd like you to help me tomorrow. I could really use you, son."

"Are you serious?" He hadn't sacrificed a splendid sail, cocktails at the yacht club, perhaps a party at some fine house in the foothills, and driven a hundred miles just to carry hod. Couldn't his father understand that? He had come because he knew he was everything to his parents.

"I thought it might be fun."

"OK, Dad," he had said. He had also come to repay in geniality part of the debt he owed them. "Sure."

"It's a small patch and won't take long," his father had gone on. "The place is at the very top of Coldwater Canyon. Beautiful view. The lady is real nice. She'll probably offer us a beer, hey?"

"Right," he had agreed.

So there he was, rattling across the Valley with his father in a junk heap on wheels, and he had decided to make the best of it.

"The truck's falling apart, Dad. Why don't you get a new one?"

"Can't afford to. Besides," he laughed, "it runs. Hell, it's only twenty years old. I bet it lasts another twenty."

A Continental passed with a honk, and a passenger in the rear seat turned to look.

Mr. Porter grunted.

Robert glanced at him. Years ago, when his father was a contractor with large crews, four or five trucks, and several plaster mixers he must have believed that with luck he might get rich. Often in those days Robert would awaken at dawn to hear men's voices moving about in the backyard, and sometimes he would dress quickly and run outside and one of the men might tousle his hair. It had been great fun to leave for a job with a truck full of plasterers (slobs, actually, Robert now realized) and then gather up scrap lumber and start a fire and stand

around it rubbing your hands, making jokes, waiting for the hod carriers to mix the first batch of mud.

He had to say something to his father, so he asked if he too missed those earlier times.

"Oh, a little. But those big jobs, you know, were risky. Sometimes you made a bundle, sometimes you lost your shirt. And a little fellow like me—well, Robbie, you don't have much margin for error." He paused. "You get enough of these small patches and you make money. I only hope the calls keep coming in. Take this job today. I'll make about a hundred and fifty on it, less ten or so for materials."

When he noticed his father looking over at him, Robert chuckled appreciatively. He had been picturing the ad in the yellow pages: *James Porter, Licensed Plasterer, Patching and Repairs by Experts.*

"If I could get a couple of jobs like this every week. But most of them are peanuts. Twenty buck jobs."

The truck had started up Coldwater Canyon, and as Robert looked out and down at the expensive homes notched in the hillsides he was almost angry. Why couldn't his father be like the guy he saw below holding a long pole of a swimming pool brush in one hand and idly twisting the hair on his chest with the other? As the noise from the truck reached him, the man looked up and shook his head slowly. What was he thinking? Dirty plasterers? Hicks? Beer drinkers?

For some reason the man smiled and waved enthusiastically.

"But I ought to thank God I can work at all," Mr. Porter was saying. "Some guys my age can't walk across the street. A few more years, then maybe I'll sell the house and get a small place up the coast somewhere. How'd that be? Social Security check, fishing all the time, a patch now and then for extra money. What more could a man want?"

"Nothing. You should do it, though. Don't just talk about it."

Robert turned in his seat to stare grimly at the man by the swimming pool, but he had looked away.

"I suppose I do talk too much about it, son."

They turned into a concrete driveway with tall pittosporum hedges on each side which meandered over a rise and ended behind a long, low house. They could see Signal Hill, the ocean, and even Catalina Island, very far out. When the engine died, everything became shockingly quiet, and in that chilly morning silence Robert felt like an intruder there behind the house. He wondered if the owners had heard the truck rattling in. "Thieves," "murderers," they probably thought, then remem-

bered it was only the plasterers.

As they began to unload the tools, steel banging against steel, Robert wanted to keep low, ready to hit the dirt in case someone got mad. He looked at his father angrily, as if he were to blame for something, but Mr. Porter only smiled kindly at him over the noise. With a shoulder wrenching tug, Mr. Porter started the mixer: there was an outrageous clatter, then a steady chug-chug. The look on his father's face seemed even more determinedly cheerful than it had all morning, as though he were trying to conceal his embarrassment, his dirty clothes and cracked hands. Perhaps he was daring people to call him a noise-maker, a slob. ("Garbagemen and plasterers," he used to say, "what's the difference? People think you're a fool. Dumb. Don't know no better.")

"Good morning, Mrs. Carlson," called out Mr. Porter, waving, making a little skip step as he hurried toward the back porch where she was standing. "I hope we didn't wake you."

She was probably about fifty but she looked much younger; her long brown and grey hair was braided about her head, and she wore a loose corduroy housecoat over a black ruffled nightgown. When she saw the bucket in his hand, the plastic tarps under his arm, and the pointer and the trowel jutting from his pockets, her face cleared of annoyance.

"You certainly do begin early," she said quietly, patiently. "You will finish it all today?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's why we begin early."

"Fine"

"Do you have another bathroom you can use this morning?"

"Yes, we do."

Mr. Porter watched her carefully as she gazed over his head at the truck and the chugging mixer. She was attractive, trim—probably a swimmer or a tennis player—and so careless about the details of her appearance that she seemed almost intimidating to Robert. Both he and his father caught glimpses of her brown legs behind the ruffled nightgown; there were chips of pink polish on the toenails of her bare feet. Were it not so embittering, it would be amusing to imagine his father acting on some wayward impulse. Never in a million years.

"Can we go through that side hall?" asked Mr. Porter.

"Certainly." She moistened her lips with her tongue. "Don't make a mess now," she said gently.

"Clean as a whistle," grinned Mr. Porter and whistled.

"Good," she said, not smiling, turning away.

Carrying tools into the bathroom, Robert noticed that the

room across the hall was a large study, and through the plate glass windows he saw Beverly Hills below. Shelves of books, paintings on the walls, a piece of wire sculpture on the corner of a desk, a round conference table. Robert couldn't picture his father in such a room, but it was precisely the sort of place he himself had learned to appreciate: a place where confident people make informed decisions and shrewd judgments.

After the first batch of plaster was mixed, Robert watched his father prepare the wall. The hole was four by five, gaping and musty. Mr. Porter knocked out old plaster, nailed up bottom-board and metal lath, and in half an hour the wall was ready. Robert had to admit that he knew his job.

"We'll be out of here in two hours," he said.

"Well," said Mr. Porter, "you take a wall like that. Plaster all over the floor. Jagged edges, messy, looks like hell. The whole wall is ruined and people think that a hundred and fifty is nothing to fix it up. Another guy would charge two hundred, maybe three. And I do a good job. You can bet they won't have to call me again. No cracks."

Robert had been nodding interestedly. Mr. Porter paused to look at him.

"We'll leave the place so clean," he continued, "they won't know we've been here. They get their money's worth."

An hour later the scratch coat was on. While it hardened Robert and his father sat on the floor and talked. When Mr. Porter mentioned that the Carlsons wrote movie scripts and teleplays Robert thought how wonderful it would be if they got him a part in one. It could happen. After all, several of his classmates had been in pictures. Suddenly Mrs. Carlson appeared at the doorway; one of her heels tore the plastic tarp which bunched up underfoot.

"I'm so sorry."

"No problem," said Mr. Porter. "I got hundreds of feet of the stuff. Enough to last me forever."

"It certainly does keep things neat and clean. I expected more fuss." Now she was wearing a glossy brown leather skirt with a matching vest. A wooden pin slanted through her hair bun. As she and Mr. Porter finished discussing the next step, she glanced at Robert.

"I see you have a helper."

Robert pursed his lips and looked at her shrewdly. Women like her were a dime a dozen, he thought.

"This is my son, Robert. He's home from college for the weekend and wanted to help me out.

"Hello, Robert," she said. "Are you going into your father's business after college?"

"Not him. He's too smart for that. I'm not one of those fathers that'll let his kid make the same mistakes he did. I want him to do what he wants. You see what I mean?"

She smiled quickly and said, "I certainly do."

"Good," said Mr. Porter. "A lot of people don't, you know."

For an instant Mrs. Carlson looked closely at Mr. Porter. Then she said, "Well. I'm going away for an hour. Is there anything you need?"

Sitting there on the bathroom floor in their plaster encrusted clothes, they were, Robert saw, puny men, insignificant.

"No, ma'am," said Mr. Porter. "Thank you."

She went across the hall and shut the door to the study. She locked it with a key she had been carrying.

"Bye, now," she said, looking first at Mr. Porter, then at Robert.

Mr. Porter stared at the doorway for a moment, and then went back to his work.

"Does she think we'll steal from her?" asked Robert. "Jesus Christ, what a stuck-up bitch!"

"Don't talk like that, Robert," Mr. Porter said sharply.

"And don't worry about it," he continued, looking at the wall. "People don't know who you are. You can't blame them. There are lots of bad characters around construction, you know. If she pays her bill, I don't care what she thinks of me."

"You should."

"She's nicer than most, let me tell you. They think plasterers are dummies. I was doing a patch a couple of weeks ago at a place where this cute little girl stood around watching me. All of a sudden her mother comes in with two other women and tells the little girl to keep away from the dirty old man. They all laughed, even the little girl." He paused. "I laughed too."

"We should get up and leave," said Robert. "Right now."

"But if you let yourself be insulted all the time, Robbie, you'd have no work at all." He smiled. "Maybe it keeps you humble, I don't know."

He touched the wall, found it dry, and began scraping his trowel with the pointer.

"The meek shall inherit the earth," he said, "or something like that."

"What?"

"Of course some people respect you as a craftsman. It ain't easy to plaster a wall. Some people know that." He turned to

Robert. "And lots of them can't believe a dummy like me has a son in college either. Hey, Robbie?" He grabbed Robert's knee for the second time that day.

"I couldn't do it without you, Dad," Robert said gravely. "I don't mean just money, either, you've taught me a lot that's more important."

Mr. Porter frowned a little, but Robert was certain he would remember those words.

"Well, son, I sure don't know about that. But I'm glad you think so."

They returned to work and in an hour the finish coat was on. While Mr. Porter troweled the wall smooth, Robert gathered all the buckets and tools and washed them in the water barrel. He scraped and washed the sides and blades of the mixer without letting any plaster water splash on the driveway; then he wiped up the drops of plaster on the pavement along the route to the bathroom and washed away the residue with a hose. Even though the whole process was almost automatic, Robert had hated it for years. But the old man always wanted his tracks completely erased so that people would pay their bills without complaint and perhaps recommend him to someone else.

After Robert finished loading the truck, he walked past the kitchen where Mrs. Carlson was talking with someone. He glanced in the open window and a man stared back at him over a cup of coffee.

"That's the plasterer's helper," Robert heard Mrs. Carlson say. "I had better see how they are doing."

Robert met his father emerging from the bathroom. The plastic tarp was rolled under one arm, and Mr. Porter held a bucket of clear water and a brush—for washing away any specks remaining on the floor. A towel hung from one of his back pockets, his pointer stuck out from the other, and his cap, with HIGHLAND STUCCO printed across the front, was tilted on the back of his head. He looked very tired, his morning gaiety exhausted. After a fast sail, as the schooner moved back into the harbor and the crew was furling the sails, the skipper always threw himself on the deck next to the cockpit. "Jesus Christ," he would say, "My back hurts. My arms ache. Someone take the helm."

Mrs. Carlson came through the door which she had locked earlier and glanced into the bathroom.

"There's a thin streak along the baseboard there," Mr. Porter said, gesturing wearily over his shoulder. "But I can't get it any cleaner. In about an hour all you have to do is take

a rag and wipe it up. As soon as it dries it turns into powder and you just wipe it up."

"I'm sure I can do that," she said, her voice as soft as a blue quilt, a disgusting voice, Robert thought. "The wall looks splendid. Do you want to be paid now or will you be mailing a bill?"

"You'll get it in a few days, Mrs. Carlson. Now if the wall should fall down, be sure and call me."

"I'm sure it won't. It looks splendid."

"All our work's guaranteed."

As she turned to leave, he asked, "Mind if we look at the view for a minute?"

"Not at all."

They walked to the side of the house and looked out at the city. There was nothing new to say. After Mr. Porter remarked how crowded Los Angeles was becoming and how he would like to leave town forever and go surf fishing, they walked back toward the truck. As they passed the kitchen window they overheard Mrs. Carlson say to her husband, "We'll, I'm glad it's over. People like that always scare me, I admit it. Even now, I have to clean up after them."

"What did you expect?" replied Mr. Carlson offhandedly.  
"At least he's cheap."

"He's also filthy."

They climbed into the truck. Mr. Porter sat behind the wheel rubbing his forehead, not closing the door.

"She ought to be shot," Robert said. "Horsewhipped."

"Just a minute, Robbie."

He jumped down, went back to the mixer, reached down into the water, and withdrew a gob of dripping white plaster. Robert watched from the rear window as his father walked to the main entrance and rang the bell. When Mrs. Carlson opened the door he hurled the gob at the porch in front of her feet. Little lumps of plaster flew back on the walls and the carpet.

He walked quickly back to the truck and they drove off, rattling and clanking so loudly that Robert wanted to leap out and hide in the hedge.

"Are they following us?" asked Mr. Porter a few minutes later, after they were halfway down Coldwater Canyon. Then he emitted a strange, low-pitched sound, a lengthened animal-like grunt.

"I don't know. You're driving too fast."

Robert looked behind and saw the mixer, a great hulk of plaster encrusted steel, swaying from one side of the lane to the

other. He wondered how they could get away with that thing attached to them.

"I shouldn't have done that, Robbie."

The ride home seemed endless. Every mile or so Mr. Porter would giggle to himself, look heavenward with a "God-oh-God," and then make that sound. Robert didn't know what was the matter. If only the truck had stopped, he would have opened the door and slipped away. To mess up the house of important people like the Carlsons was the same as urinating in an art gallery. That streak along the baseboard. That gob of plaster hitting the flagstone porch with a liquid slap. Robert shuddered. Mr. Porter often said, "Well, you know, there ain't much room for the little fellow in this business." All the way home Robert recalled that phrase, "the little fellow, "the little fellow." His father's hands were opening and closing on the steering wheel, hands battered and scarred, powdery white, like a clown's makeup.

"How are they going to handle us, Dad?" he asked.

Mr. Porter looked at his son. "Don't you worry about it," he chuckled through his nose. "It's my worry."

They finally reached home. As they removed their work clothes in the garage, Mr. Porter suggested that Robert say nothing to his mother, but as soon as they opened the back door she called to them from the kitchen that two men were coming up the walk. Mr. Porter grabbed his bathrobe and moved to the front door just as Mr. Carlson and a younger man, looking angry, stepped on the porch. Robert watched it all from behind the venetian blinds.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm sorry. Believe me, sir. I lost my head." Mr. Porter was holding his hands high in front of him, palms outward, his fingers moving delicately back and forth as if he were hushing an indignant crowd.

"You don't have to pay for the patch, you know. Everything's free. I don't know what happened, Mr. Carlson. I must be getting old. It's all free, remember. No bill."

The younger man, perhaps a friend or a son, maybe even a policeman, Robert thought, smiled disdainfully.

"That," he said, "was a dumb thing to do, old man."

"Really, it was. It was dumb, that's the word."

Mr. Porter's bathrobe had fallen open and Robert could see sweat running down his neck and mingling with grey hairs on his chest.

"I don't know what made me do it. Dumb's the word, all right. I must of lost my head." He stopped talking abruptly when Mr. Carlson raised a hand:

"We all do things we regret, I suppose. Apparently you had your own reasons. It's not worth bothering about."

Mr. Carlson's hair was grey also, and he seemed about the same age as Robert's father. He wore a striped sports shirt, open at the neck, and a tan blazer, and though he stood lightly with his hands in his pockets, he must have felt misplaced, uncomfortable, Robert imagined, like a yachtsman at the zoo. Mr. Carlson turned away.

The younger man continued to smile at Mr. Porter as he glanced at the sweat and the grey hair and the bathrobe, and then he turned to join Mr. Carlson, shaking his head as he walked away. Later that night, over drinks, some blonde huddled close, the younger man would probably laugh and laugh.

"What was that all about?" asked Mrs. Porter as she came in from the kitchen.

"Just some men about a job," Mr. Porter replied. Then he said to Robert: "You go ahead and take a shower, son. I can wait. And Robbie . . ."

"Yes?"

"Thanks. It was nice just being with you today."

That evening Robert left the Valley and drove back to Santa Barbara, relieved with each mile. Once or twice there flashed in his mind a picture from his youth: the old man, hawk and trowel held firmly, shoulders stooped, arms covered with tiny hard white spots, like strange beauty marks; he was smiling kindly at Robert, about to make a request of some sort. Robert thanked God he was free from all that now. As he passed the harbor he could smell the bracing salt air and see the moon shining on the water. A gentle breeze blew through the palm trees. He was certain tomorrow's sail would be splendid.

# L' Absinthe

(After Degas. 1876.)

IRA D. SHAFFER

You sit there absently regarding the horizon  
Of the glass: a cul-de-sac of crystal, or is it  
The edge of the cheese-wood bench that you ponder.  
Your bonnet tilts lazily upon your drifting, sallow hair;  
Your lips are pursed—  
Has a lover rejected you, and taken your cash,  
Is the month's rent due?

A cool-green fire awaits your tongue:  
Chartreuse, elegant, the fashion of the day;  
The angry liqueur of night.

But this afternoon, your shoulders  
Are rounded, and your bosom sags—  
The glass is still three-quarters full.

A man shares your table,  
Elbow neatly placed, flush to his carafe  
Of red wine. He stares from your left,  
Outward from the cafe-windows  
Where both your heads are silhouetted.

He chews the stem of his pipe,  
His hair is shaggy, beard unkempt—  
With eyebrows arched, has he focused  
On a new cause celebre, a preening courtesan?

Is he your pimp, or a stranger?  
No, you are not even aware of his presence . . .  
The acrid smell of tobacco, or cheap cologne.

Only the dull, subtle death that steals upon you  
Gives warning: the black cat that might have crawled  
Under your seat; the suicide-note that never was written.  
The angel of death is your lover, a reflection in Paris-green.

Your eyes.

## Murdered Sleep

T. ALAN BROUGHTON

The past would only be  
some dark extinguished  
by the sudden light. "What's done  
is done" she said and stroked  
her hair once more  
before she flicked the lamp  
and settled calmly into bed. But sleep  
was just beyond the pillow's  
edge and though she moved  
from side to side it would not come  
to help her mind shut down. "What is it  
I've always loved to sleep." At three  
she rose and could not cry. How  
could she forget that nothing parts  
cleanly in the mind—the angry child  
that strides away still carries  
the parent in his head, the lover  
who quarrels with things unsaid  
has lost his way. She lay down  
and envied how the trees  
that rose in webs across her wall  
stayed in one place  
and had no memory.

# Madame Recamier's Last Farewell

CHARLES EDWARD EATON

NOT LONG AFTER we met her, Elaine and I decided that Clarissa Broadmead was our Eclectic who brought us the world at the same time that she made us feel that our town of Meadowmount was very choice.

This might tend to convey the impression of a svelte, elegant-looking creature, but, in fact, Clarissa was short, plump, blue-eyed, ringleted in gray hair, her round, cheerful face shining with kitchen glow. She might have peeped out of a ruffled cap, one of the domestics of Chardin or Vuillard, except that her high-pitched, Anglicized voice sometimes slipped into a twang which betrayed the middle western origin.

Her parties were peopled with anyone who seemed choice and interesting or just sturdy and lasting. But she could close with the most casual warmth around Elaine and myself as though we were the ones she particularly wanted to see, having just arisen out of a daydream about us from her Empire sofa at the end of the living room. We were the culmination of the occasion. Like Madame Recamier, she had been waiting for our arrival to say, "*Enfin!*", enveloping us with graciousness.

It amazed us therefore to discover that Clarissa was not particularly well-liked. Various reasons were given. She worked too hard at it, she gave herself airs, she looked like a cook and acted like a Countess. Her annual benefit for the Fire Department had a touch of the chatelaine among her villagers. Invited up to see the autumn leaves, members of the U. N. were themselves put on exhibit. And yet people always came to her parties. It was simply the thing to do to embrace her publicly and dismiss her privately as the funny little woman who had house-

maid's knee from kneeling before everyone.

Not that she was without her *aficionados*. The Blessingtons in Litchfield really liked her, the Townsends in Meadowmount, an unsuccessful writer or artist, a stray woman living alone who knew how much "work" went into her efforts to put herself across.

Aware of the difficult situation, we marveled the more that she did not let it show, that she never once suggested that the hand of Madame Recamier had been extended in vain. Elaine and I are essentially spectators with a practiced eye for innuendoes, and we had observed with increasing resentment the little snubs, snickerings, sidelong glances, the not-so-subtle put-downs, wondering if Clarissa were fully cognizant, and we decided, incredibly, but fortunately, she was not. The epigraph of her life seemed quite ingenuously to be: I will not let thee go except thou bless me.

Certainly part of our attraction was that we were more available than most. I am a landscape architect working on my own, and I suspect that Clarissa, who adored the romance of the imagination, believed I had as many elves as Santa Claus to do my work. At any rate, Elaine and I were pressed into service rather more often than was convenient. A kind of synecdoche of our relationship was the quick dashing over for tea, the unexpected demand in a chipping sparrow voice that we come by and see the pansies, but, most warmly and memorably, in winter the suppers *a trois* by the fireplace of Six Chimneys.

She always met us at the door, fixing the tone of the occasion with the shaft of a compliment.

"Elaine, you are as beautiful as a Christmas rose. Paul, where did you get that lamb's wool hat? It makes you look like a diplomat. We ought to send *you* to deal with the Russians."

"Don't spoil us," I said for she was ready to elaborate. "Elaine and I can live for a week on a good compliment."

"Sit by the fire. I'll get you a drink. Then let me sit and look at you."

We settled down cozily into her medium for we knew that an evening with Clarissa was to find ourselves delineated again, recouped from the effacing hands of others. Even I saw Elaine more clearly when she had finished touching her up with remarks about her eyes, hair, the character in her face—"You look like a young Lady Churchill, my dear." I felt tall, lean, and handsome as a member of the Coldstream Guards from her astringent and restorative attentions. She never planted a tree or moved a shrub without my approval, and always asked for advice on specimens submitted to the Garden Club show.

It was overdone, perhaps, it partook of the theatrical, but what other play lacking such scenes has the chance of a longer run?

She was only gone for a moment to fill the ice bucket, but even so, one did not feel alone since Six Chimneys was so compact with her life. At this place, this point in time, her special dedication was the house in Connecticut, but there were her handsome English antiques, her French things, and, most exotically, in the dining room, her urns, trays, and artifacts of the Middle East, all placed expertly and lovingly as if still warm, from her hand. If it had a trace of the curatorial, we learned from her that there is no one who makes you feel more secure and comfortable in the world than a quiet voluptuary.

Setting up a card table by the fire, she threw a beautiful cloth over it, and made it seem as handsome as one end of a dinner party where three intimate friends had been happily placed. The sweetbreads were delicious and the wine excellent.

The inclosed world was just what we needed, having received that afternoon a revolting letter from our son Curtis in response to my refusal to give him money to replace the Honda he had smashed.

"Aren't generation gaps tiresome?" Elaine asked, explaining that our college sophomore had used this opportunity to accuse us of a long list of backward-looking ways.

"I try not to acknowledge them."

"I know. Even Curtis likes you for that. But you could step over an abyss as if it were a ditch," I said.

"How can you cross them otherwise?" she went on. "Would I be sitting here with you? I choose people by touch."

"You sound like E. M. Forster—*Only connect*," I called after her as she went into the kitchen to see to the dessert.

"Oh, I knew him in England. An adorable man," she said, popping back into the doorway. "He wasn't afraid of contradictions. He never let them get him down. He never threw up his hands."

"You mean he could still savor the wine when the storm was raging?" I asked and poured us another glass of Pouilly Fuisse.

"Yes. That's it. Paul, my dear, you deserve to survive." And I thought, remembering Curtis, thank God somebody thinks so.

Clarissa did not, as she often said, like to let the conversation go downhill, but she did believe in occasional confessions, and one evening she took us entirely into her confidence as far as she was willing to stretch that word. With the technique of

Edith Wharton's *A Backward Glance*, she told us about meeting her husband David Broadmead when he was a Captain in the British Army stationed in Istanbul where she had worked in the Red Cross, her years in London after the war as the wife of a prominent publisher whose house was always filled with intellectuals and artists. Then the trips, the trips, the trips, the making of portals everywhere. The Empire sofa had discovered very early on that it could fly as well as any magic carpet.

Having met David in the first great war, she lost him in the second. He had had a nervous breakdown, finally gone literally out of his mind, and deserted her and their son Berkeley. On a recuperative trip back to the States, she had met Jereda and Judd Townsend who had persuaded her that Western Connecticut was America's answer to England and found her the house in Meadowmount. But she was reminiscent about her marriage in a strange past-present way. Her black lace dress was the one she "always wore to the ballet with David." The arm-chair by the fireplace was "David's chair." A letter-opener, a picture you looked at, almost any object picked up from a table, might turn out to be a fetish.

We wondered if she realized we knew the variant. Anne Knapp who found her cloying had gone out of the way to get the dirt on her. According to Anne's pitiless garnerings from friends in England, David had not lost his mind at all except metaphorically in that Clarissa had finally driven him crazy with her posturing and possessiveness. Rose petals kept raining down on his head, it was true, but not from the hand of a Missouri girl with eyes colored like the dome of a blue mosque in Istanbul and a body like a column of alabaster. Clarissa had begun to look more like the old flower lady at the door of her perpetual theater, and he had run off with the ingenue. Elaine and I loathed Anne Knapp, but was there anything to be said for her rendering of David's behavior? Had Clarissa killed him with kindness?

People like Clarissa with their evenings by the fire tend to seem suspect these days. We are reluctant to believe that quiet pictures balance violent ones. The immaculate cardinal at the window provides an ambivalent answer to the fact that somewhere a vulture is feeding on carrion. A New England house given over to personal relationship and gracious living seems on the verge of apologizing for its existence. The inhabitants interrogate themselves endlessly. Do small, fastidious actions have any leverage against overpowering events? Merely decorative, superannuated as the engravings of Redoute roses on her walls, did Clarissa Broadmead rise faithfully from her

couch in vain? Was her editing of the world or Anne Knapp's the truer one? A nostalgia of questions rose like the crooked necks of sea birds over an ocean too monstrous to contemplate whenever one pondered Clarissa's worth.

Another synecdoche of our friendship was the annual Christmas dinner to which we were always invited. Christmas in Meadowmount, with a landscape that looks like a far-flung collection of old-fashioned greeting cards, is about as pleasant an anachronism as I know. The last twenty years of disruption and dislocation couldn't have happened at all—we are out of context, the future is a sleigh sliding to the sound of jingle bells. Clarissa waiting at her door in a red dress trimmed with white fur seemed indeed to have imagined the scene over which we had been dreaming all day.

Yet, ironically, it is the last Christmas dinner, an end to all that, so to speak, as if the century did not mean it to continue after all, which has its special, ambivalent illumination when we think of her. For this evening of evenings, she selected the guests as carefully as the ingredients of her own plum pudding: always the Blessingtons, "Jiggy" Reese, the Townsends, someone important from out of town who this year was Julian Scott-Fox, military attache of the British Embassy. But the Sloans, also regulars of long standing, came down with the flu. The Knapps had to be invited at the last moment and I thought with the kind of premonition that melts the icicles on the Christmas tree that she might as well have brought Scrooge into our midst. Roger did not like to wear a tuxedo, and Anne would resent the "Christmas in England" production.

The Blessingtons came in as if they had driven up in a troika, Jane wearing an ancient full-length mink and hood, John in a long sweeping black coat with fur collar. They were Genesee Valley aristocrats who had lost most of their money and retreated, as she said, "to the Litchfield hills." Nevertheless, *noblesse oblige* still operated strongly in them, and they arrived with lacy, silk sachets for the women and hand-embroidered handkerchiefs for the men tucked in a needlepoint bag. Clarissa, particularly fond of those who reminded her of an ancien régime which had never existed in America, greeted them like their old nurse, upwrapping, debooting, hugging them into the warmth of her house while Jane murmured, "Clarissa, dear Clarissa," and "Long John," unwound from his scarf, escaped to pet the white poodle that might have wandered in from a creche. Even people like the Knapps who didn't like them, partly because Clarissa was so adoring, admitted they contributed atmosphere.

Judd Townsend, former Yale professor, bonafide intellectual and bird-lover, was a master of social relations through rumination, and Clarissa never gave even a Christmas party without at least one Brain. "I don't always understand Judd," she said. "But I adore to see him smoking his pipe and just sitting there thinking. There's always a bottom to things when he's around." Jereda Townsend, whom everyone called Jerry, was dark, sanguine, "the Blood in the Brain," as Ann Knapp said maliciously, and she had a laugh like the Ho-Ho-Ho of Santa Claus. She almost knocked Jiggy over with her enthusiastic embrace. Thin, attenuated as a Giacometti statue, he was nevertheless always so impeccably and modishly dressed that ever-ready Anne, who loved to counter names with satirical rhymes, said that he was not so much a Jiggy as a Twiggy. The only eligible bachelor in the neighborhood, he was further characterized by inexhaustible Anne as *cavalier servente* to "the late, late jet set."

"Anne, Anne, face like a pan," as Elaine, mimicking her penchant, called her, and her round, shining, vacuous face with yellowish brown bulging eyes dropped into it like two bloodshot eggs indeed suggested that homely utensil. But what was she doing in the midst of the Christmas party? She rode, played the piano, painted a bit, but mainly catalogued and indexed the people in and around Meadowmount. When you mentioned anyone's name, she quickly flipped through her file, and there it was—a description of the Most Unwanted Person, number such and such.

But we got through cocktails without too much crinkling of the Christmas foil. Clarissa's tree dominating one end of the room provided an instant bond since it seemed an amalgam of all the trees anyone had ever seen. She had been acquiring baubles for more than thirty years, and the logistics of getting them out and putting them away must have been staggering. The abstraction of ball and pendant was not enough—there was a whole Noah's Ark of tiny animals, fishes, birds, scattered here and there, minute violins, harps, drums, horns. Leave nothing out, go far enough with anything and it becomes remarkable. Over the years the Christmas tree had become an amusing, ironic trademark, and most of the ornaments were gifts from all over the world. It was like a great overpowering totem of friendship.

Even so, Anne remarked in a stage whisper that she wondered "if the dryad who inhabited that tree had ever dreamed of what a beating she was going to take at Christmas."

Perhaps Clarissa sometimes pumped people too vigorously, but more often than not up through the rust and cluttered pipes came sparkling water. At dinner it was Anne Knapp who had to

be concentrated on, for no matter how assiduously and deftly Clarissa worked the handle of her nature, she would not "give."

Over the blue light of her share of plum pudding which she promptly blew out as if it came from a gas chamber, she asked, "I know it can't be true, Clarissa, but did I hear that you are planning to run for the State Legislature?"

Jerry Townsend, biting on a gold coin in her serving of pudding, let it tinkle on the plate, and laughed more raucously than usual. "Oh, I'm the lucky one. I'll have a whole year of love and money."

"Darling Jerry," Clarissa said. "And you'll give it all to others."

"Oh, do keep a little for yourself, Jerry," Anne forged on. "I think your friends would like to know, Clarissa. Are we to be called upon to support you?"

"Yes," Clarissa said, releasing the handle at last. "I intend to run though I hadn't meant to make so personal an announcement at Christmas dinner. But if you insist, the answer to your second question is also yes. I do hope for the support of my friends."

"Clarissa, dear." Jane Blessington drew herself up like Edna Mae Oliver playing the Red Queen and looked severely at Anne. "You do not need to hope. You shall have it."

"Have you held office before?" Anne glanced at Jane as if she were the dodo bird.

"No, but there always has to be a first time."

"I do admire your courage. I suppose you'll be running as a Democrat."

"Of course. How else?" Clarissa's voice sounded hoarse now, and we knew that this always happened to her under emotional pressure.

"But have you considered that this is a rock-ribbed Republican area?" I thought if Anne asked one more question I would stick her with a knife.

"I have, Anne. I've always known you were a Republican. I'm hoping that some of my friends will cross over." Clarissa smiled at her inquisitor. One wondered how she could make the facial muscles work.

"Hear, hear," I said, raising my glass. "Let's drink a toast to the Honorable Clarissa Broadmead."

Anne looked as if she wished I were made of plum pudding and could light a match to me.

After dinner, we played what Anne called "one of Clarissa's games." All of us were to select a character famous in history—writer, artist, soldier, politician, whatever—and each person

was to be subjected to leading questions until his character was guessed and eliminated. The final hold-out would win the game.

I was Claude Monet, Elaine, Berthe Morisot, and, knowing one another's enthusiasms so well, we soon eliminated each other. Julian as Lord Kitchener lasted only a couple of rounds. Anne selected some esoteric Spanish writer, but there again her husband Roger let the cat out of the bag. It was amusing and touching how we betrayed each other, and Jiggy who could not stand being grilled soon gave himself away. Only Clarissa was left, pleased as a child that no one could guess her choice and that the lull after a large dinner had been filled in with so much animation.

When she announced her character as Chateaubriand, Anne immediately said, "You are lucky, Clarissa. You have no one to tell on you. Now you can give the prize to yourself. Roger, poor man, knows everything that goes on in my mind."

"Everything? Then he must have a very dramatic mental life." Elaine looked at Roger who had ceased even trying to pick up after his wife. He rolled his eyes like a minstrel man as if to suggest things might go a lot better if he were permitted to tell one of his dirty jokes.

When Clarissa gave the prize to Jiggy who had come in second in spite of himself, Anne had something to say about that. "What a coincidence, Clarissa. That's his favorite wine."

"Jiggy's not the only one who likes that wine," I said and literally pushed Anne toward the piano to play Christmas carols which she did very badly, pawing the keys like one of her horses, and Elaine and I were rather merciless in our digs. The Blessingtons winked and mugged, and Jerry Townsend plugged in her laugh and kept running fingers through the air as if she were playing a complementary keyboard whenever Anne hit a snag.

Though she came close, Clarissa did not win a seat in the State Legislature due in large part to an active behind the scenes campaign led by Anne Knapp. I suppose none of us fully realized what this defeat meant to her. She had made an extraordinary effort with the community, and going to Hartford was to have been a natural, organic thing. It would have proved the potency of friendship, the old-fashioned efficacy of face to face encounter, the politics of home and hearth. All of those tireless risings from the couch to greet the individual should have synergized some spirit of recognition and affirmation. Clarissa's history of human relations, if she had thought to write it, would have been a very simple one. It would have included the small kindnesses, the daily effort to be cheerful and agreeable, the dispensation of the connective tissue of life that was so carelessly disregarded and

thrown away simply because it seemed to come from an inexhaustible spool.

Anne Knapp who had pulled more than her share of this skein directly from her association with Clarissa wanted more than anyone else to be its Atropos. She spread the notion that Clarissa's Democratic affiliation was nothing but an affectation, an ego-indulgence. How could a character like her straight out of silk-fork fiction represent the interests of the plumber, the man who ran the gravel pit? She became particularly enraged when Jiggy pulled himself up, tapped some unknown source of male hormones, and went on the road for Clarissa. He organized a group called "Boosters for Broadmead," and his elongated, El Greco figure became a familiar feature at coffee klatches and meetings of women's clubs. It had long been known that Clarissa pampered Jiggy, giving him expensive ties, scarves, and gloves, and that Jiggy was happy to be her squire. But during the campaign he began to sport a new yellow Buick convertible in which he drove Clarissa around to make her pitch. An odd but lively pair, they were making a dull campaign into a lark. This was too much for Anne who had known Jiggy all her life and had tried to make a beau of him in high school. She knew, or said she knew, exactly what Jiggy's income was, and it did not allow a new auto more than once in seven or eight years. She dropped the hint that Clarissa had bought the Buick for him, suggested late evenings that had nothing to do with politics, and wondered out loud if Jiggy might not indeed be well named since it could be short for gigolo.

Clarissa must have heard these allegations, but she did not acknowledge them, and she did not stop driving around town in the yellow Buick. But after the election there was a difference. She was less elastic, less kinetic. She exuded a poignant quality of disappointment as if "Smarty gave a Party, and Nobody came." Not long after, she took a trip around the world with intentions of stopping off in the Middle East for several months.

So there was no Christmas dinner at Six Chimneys that year, and the little house which had been like a frequent illumination on our engagement calendar had slipped off the pages. I drove by late on the afternoon of Christmas Eve delivering some gifts, and the dark facade looked insubstantial, pushed back, an almost fallen through part of the universe. One had the sickening feeling that it could easily crack or rot out into the blackest of holes. Skaters on a pond nearby were writing, it seemed, exuberant footnotes to each other, but it was just such a page that had let the light in the little house go out. The cold lavender of the Connecticut hills did not dote on warm interiors

—Christmas at Clarissa's was not really a part of natural history.

It was a long winter and a reluctant spring, and then we heard that Clarissa had sent word to her lawyer that Six Chimneys was to be put on the market. Cheery cards came from various parts of the world, but no mention was made of the disposal of her house. We, at least, were not to be included in the sale. Since we were her youngest friends, she always called us "Children," and it made us feel years younger than we were. We were relieved that her cards began, "Greetings Children!" Somewhere Clarissa was still lying on her portable couch—we had every reason to believe we could dissuade her from selling her house.

She returned in May, and lost no time in settling into Six Chimneys. The dismal proposal of the winter had been shared with us because we were good friends with her lawyer, but it was not generally known. Invitations went out for the garden party which she always gave in apple blossom time. It was a good sign. The intimate history of Connecticut was going to continue; we were being recorded once more. It was as though Clarissa had taken up the modest story of man, and was ready to read to "her Children" again. But, as it turned out, the garden party at Six Chimneys crowded the synecdoche.

Clarissa insisted she always had luck with the weather, and this day had been especially designated in the script. The ancient, gnarled, indefatigably blooming apple tree overhanging her terrace looked like a natural embodiment of her dreams. Pruned, debranched by the winter storms, "It always rose to the occasion," as she said, and managed one more year of bloom, streaking its perfume in the garden as if someone had rapidly passed a giant sachet through the air. The other trees were only beginning to show their slow *pointillisme* of green. It was the apple tree's day.

Clarissa had on a pink dress nearly the shade of the blossoms, and she had gone to militant efforts with her appearance. All of her friends were there, and each received his variant of the embracing *enfin*, but, as far as I could see, most of her enemies were there too, and I wondered how Madame Recamier, who must also have had her human share managed to indicate a difference without showing it overtly. A slight aversion of the head, a subtle lack of warmth in the pressure of the hand, or did she simply use her "At last!" indiscriminately as a *tone* that would jam the waves of the most discordant personalities?

Anne Knapp came up in a tight gray silk, battened on the winter, like a fat snake which had not yet shed its skin.

"So you're back, Clarissa. You're lucky not to have anything that keeps you in Meadowmount."

"And perhaps you are lucky that you do, Anne, dear."

"I see you have your summer furniture out. Does this mean you will be with us for a while?" Anne glanced around the garden as if counting the chairs.

"More about that later. Meanwhile, do ask the bartender to give you a drink." She had balanced the moment after all, and Anne would not try again for a while.

I was at her elbow with Elaine who whispered in her ear, "How could you invite that terrible woman? Are you trying to wear a hair shirt on the first real day of spring?"

"Perhaps I am trying to turn it into a silk blouse," Clarissa answered in abstracted good humor.

But I could see that Elaine had struck a chord which she did not wish to resonate. Even with us she was not quite with it. Her son Berkeley came up and relieved the situation at the same time that he contributed to its unreality. He was the most important thing Clarissa carted around from her past, and, as if a god had been rolled out of a crate, his image disturbed the already uncertain focus on the present.

He was to receive his Ph. D. from Harvard in June, and Clarissa had persuaded him to appear in his black and crimson robe. It was the sort of outre thing she could get by with at her best, but I had the feeling Anne Knapp would make hay out of it on this occasion.

Tall, plump, wearing a drooping moustache which made him look a little like a younger Colonel Blimp, Berkeley had the only child's sense of self-importance, though one wondered, despite the special handling, how solid and uncracked his ego really was. I liked him since I could sense that his heavy image merely muffled some of Clarissa's better qualities, but Anne and others called him "the Walrus," and thought him a pontifical bore. Clarissa used his appearance as an excuse to leave us and take him around to meet new arrivals. They did look a little foolish, the large moustached mammal and aging Alice who had perhaps "talked of many things" too often and too long.

The contingent from the Christmas party tried to close protectively around them, but Clarissa eluded us. Did we chafe her? Were we trying too hard to make her responsive again when she did not want to respond?

"Clarissa is not Clarissa today," Jane Blessington said, fixing me with her rather austere expression as if some guilt which resided in herself might be imprinted on me as well. Clarissa liked for her to look dramatic, so pushing the season she had come in a picture hat and her ropes of pearls. "Something is wrong. I can smell it," she persisted. "We are being fumigated."

Jerry Townsend let out her Santa Claus laugh which some-

how did not go as well with apple blossoms. "Now, Jane, none of us smell *that* bad."

But it was true. Clarissa did not want us next to her skin. She even preferred bantering with Anne whom she managed to keep in one of her least difficult moods. Having accomplished that, she was seen at various corners of the party jacking it up as if the technical display at least would not be allowed to sag. One could have supposed that the scene, like an old house on rollers, had been moved once too often. It would tip and collapse like a pile of jackstraws if Clarissa did not keep working it, inserting her lever. Or had it actually always been like this?

In any case, just when things were going smoothly if mechanically, Clarissa, as though turning on her handiwork, became accident prone. She dropped a glass at the feet of Anne Knapp, spraying her sandaled feet with splinters. A little later she allowed her arm to be jostled, spilling the Madeira she always drank instead of whisky, leaving a lurid bruise on the pink dress. She changed immediately into a fresh white frock which, however, did nothing for her gray hair and made her look like a distraught maid.

Several times she went to the top of the terrace and looked down on the crowd as if she intended to say something. But all she managed to convey was that she had forgotten her lines, or did not believe in them anymore, and was wandering in confusion among the stage props, having gone incongruously modern, inviting the audience in off-Broadway fashion into the drama itself. One had the absurd notion that she might start taking off her clothes and the rest of us would feel the compulsion to do likewise. The anarchic was fingering the hooks and zippers: *au fond*, we were all understudies for a hair show.

This, I admit, was an aberrant, hyperbolic extension of Clarissa's unstable unsettling behavior. The mind goes off easily in just such directions these days, perfectly willing to grant that the most circumspect of creatures might be infected with the lust for extremes.

After that moment of seeing her through the eye of a voyeur, I experienced a feeling of dread which even at the time seemed properly Kierkegaardian and retributive. I sensed that she was leaving Meadowmount for good and that that was what she was trying to get up the courage—or was it the cruelty?—to tell us.

"Is there something you want to say, Clarissa? You look simply bursting with eloquence." Anne had her mouth open like a leech.

"No, nothing at all. Don't mind my peering about. I'm the

hostess, you know." She did not quite seem to take Anne in.

"Are you sure you are feeling all right? You keep wandering around as if you were looking for something."

"In a way I am. And then I find you, Anne, dear."

"Oh? What a disappointment!"

"But isn't that what you have been trying to tell me all along, that *I am*?"

"Perhaps you wanted too much."

"And expected too much of my friends? But aren't we all that way . . . birds of a feather. We need—how shall I say it?—everything." Clarissa faltered as if the word seemed absurd even to her. "We are all birds of paradise."

"Don't be absurd, Clarissa. I *know* I'm just a sparrow. We all are."

"So be it, Anne. But would you mind not taking *my* name in vain?" Jane had worked her way to Clarissa's elbow and stood there as if supporting a statue that might fall.

Did it matter in a century of struggles over proportions and weights that Jane could make such a move, would it make any difference in the presence of Anne Knapp? Clarissa's figure of speech was too out of the ordinary to be spontaneous. It was the sort of lyric conception she must have carried around with her for a long time, and she did not seem to be talking to Anne but meditating out loud, shining all too waretly now as if she were being forced to admit the feathers were painted and lacquer steadily fell from her wings.

If we live by representations, lacking that vital image, was everything given over to the taxidermist? How much force can a private conception exert and what could be done for it when it seems to be failing? Jane, who might have been taken for one of those who have been stuffed and discounted, put out her long bony hand to see. But could one imperious old woman supporting a fastidious friend seem like anything more than a rather absurd scarecrow in a sky full of twittering sparrows?

Let us say that for the moment it saved the synecdoche. The garden party did not break up in our faces. Anne Knapp who had counted on the clustering aviary had been counterbalanced if only for a time. Surrounded by violence, a beautiful contained violence glowed and gleamed against circumstance. One could twist the neck of the bird, but it would hang from the hand, a vivid rope, transubstantiated, metamorphically persistent.

Clarissa went the next week to visit her brother in New Hampshire, and she did not return to Meadowmount. Six Chimneys had already been sold at the time of the garden party, and the movers came in and disassembled and packed her things.

The house went to some people from Honolulu who indulged in luaus under the apple tree.

With all of her fears of expressways, Clarissa drove herself out to Taos where her sister lived. The Walrus got a job at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. One could sense in Clarissa a gathering of the few basic ingredients that were left.

"Can't you just see her in beads and turquoises?" Anne asked.

Clarissa, in fact, bought an adobe house, and, impossible as it seemed to us back in Connecticut, fitted herself into it. Would she somehow once again let the spirit of Taos predominate while she stirred in the effects and associations of a lifetime?

After a time, Jane and John Blessington went out to see her. They found that Clarissa had recovered from Connecticut without altogether giving it up. The Connecticut antiques were there as well as the English, and, poignantly, even the Empire sofa had survived the adobe house. *Enfin, enfin*, and then since they could only stay for lunch on their way to California it was *si vite, si vite*, those other words with which Madame Recamier had said farewell to her guests.

When we heard from the Blessingtons, Anne Knapp came by that afternoon, for even she had received a card from Jane giving a glowing report.

"Poor Jane," she said. "She only encourages Clarissa."

The synecdoche, which is always loaded with explosives, almost burst in a shower of fragments. "And what do you do, Anne?" I asked. "What do you do?"

One would like to bow out of the story at this point, to end ambiguously with Clarissa working to maintain another pattern, a new composition. The polarization with the Annes of the world is, after all, an old human predicament, and Clarissa would undoubtedly have encountered her sort no matter where she went. Though one of the meanest tensions of experience, it can be managed, circumvented, it can be endured.

We heard from Clarissa intermittently during the next several years, but it was clear she would never return to Meadowmount even for a visit. Finally, Jiggy Reese tuned up the yellow Buick, now an aging chariot which he kept spotlessly polished, and went out to see her. He found Clarissa greatly changed. She had had an operation for cataracts, and he felt that she still did not see at all well through thick lenses. She had an Indian girl working for her who let the dust gather on the furniture, convinced that her mistress would not notice, and served a meal which was a travesty of some of Clarissa's best recipes. Jiggy

was appalled at how laborious it was for her to make any show of graciousness and cordiality.

All of this might have been surmounted, however, if he could have felt that, deeper in, Clarissa was her old self. The aging spirit always paints with fewer strokes, knows the subtlest use of its resonances, pushes forward its counters as if it pays for its last days with the most precious of jewels. When one has achieved a spiritual image among one's friends, the world which was used as materials will always tacitly be there.

But what Jiggy could not take was that he felt he had travelled across the continent to find that Clarissa did not any longer care. He diplomatically probed, listened, waited, and found it was not the cataracts, the loss of income through inflation, the difficulty of service but a blow much closer in, a thrust into the spiritual image itself.

All of us had received announcements of Berkeley's wedding, a year later we heard there was a child, and we supposed that Clarissa's happiness must be supreme. But the Walrus had married Rhoda Watkins, one of his students who came from Detroit. One could only speculate whether it was some savage instinct for survival in the modern world which made him choose a girl who was the exact opposite of his mother or whether it was Rhoda who persuaded him that that road led nowhere these days. Clarissa, no believer in generational gaps, found later than most parents that she had one on her hands.

She led into it indirectly by saying that "Rhoda was the sort that never had flowers on the dining room table," but Jiggy, who knew where her taproots were, soon had the whole story. Rhoda had lost no time in engaging in an undercover, but none the less pitched, battle for the possession of Berkeley's soul. "Mother B.," as she insisted on calling Clarissa, was made to feel that she had brought her son up as Little Lord Fauntleroy, and it was now time for him to shed his velvet knickers. Linens and family china Clarissa gave them were never used—Rhoda was strictly a paper napkin girl. Since they lived so close to each other, Clarissa had envisioned a frequent exchange of weekends and long, generous visits over the holidays, but Rhoda rationed their contact parsimoniously, explaining that she had "to bring all the baby's things, and Mother B. was so fussy about her furniture." When Clarissa came to Albuquerque, "the baby got on her nerves." Berkeley, Jr., whom she nicknamed Lee, was used more often than not as an instrument of aggression.

While Jiggy was there, at Clarissa's almost abject pleading, they drove over on Sunday. The Walrus had grown stouter than ever and was totally relaxed into a world of baby's baths and

meals served in the kitchen. He was still overtly deferential to his mother, but she was clearly a little burdensome, like a great-aunt with foibles and money which she spent on foolishness. Rhoda was not a bad-looking girl, but thin-lipped, totally devoid of romance and humor, and, though she indulged in the cliche of a miniskirt, appeared athletic and ready to engage. Lee, obscenely plump, looked as if he had been dropped from his father's androgynous belly.

Rhoda greeted Jiggy with "Oh, yes, I've heard of Mr. Reese, Mother B.. He was the one who helped you with that campaign, wasn't he?"

Jiggy was wearing one of the fancy ties Clarissa always sent him for Christmas, and he thought, Shades of Anne Knapp—I'm the gigolo again.

Before their arrival, Clarissa had removed all of her treasured small objects from the tables, explaining that Lee, who had begun to walk, was "so vigorous." Rhoda noticed this immediately and observed, "I wish you wouldn't put *all* of your knickknacks away, Mother B.. It makes us feel so unwelcome."

"But, Rhoda, dear, I'm saving them for you," Clarissa protested as she watched Lee banging a toy truck against the leg of a delicate chair. When that did not yield to the miniature King Kong, he dashed the truck against his grandmother's ankle, gurgling with pleasure when she winced.

"Where we'll put it all when Berkeley and I build the modern house we are planning I just don't know," Rhoda mused as if Clarissa were not in the room. She turned to Jiggy. "Have you ever seen anyone who has so much stuff? We've been trying to get her to sell some of it. But you know Mother B.."

The Indian girl brought in the tea, but the cinnamon toast was burnt and the tea cake was sad. Lee was allowed to pull food from the tray until Berkeley set him upon the Empire sofa which he promptly strewed with crumbs. How could the Walrus do this to his mother, Jiggy mourned? Scientists had talked for years about the "missing link" in the recesses of human history—now it was missing on the other side. Rhoda had convinced the Walrus he was dragging a ball and chain.

The only blessing was that they didn't stay long, but when they left, the house seemed disproportionately littered with their presence. Was what he and Clarissa stood for, Jiggy wondered, so fragile and open to invasion, was it, after all, nothing more than a kind of glaze over time and circumstance?

When Clarissa had closed the door, he took her in his arms. "Clarissa, my dear, my dear."

She did not struggle, but nestled against his chest for

warmth like a willingly captive bird. "I wanted you to see, Jiggy. I wanted you to see."

"Well, they've gone anyway."

"Yes, they've gone. They're always going. God knows where."

"This is just a stop along the way then?"

"Yes. Just like a service station. I always say I feed them and infuriate them." She paused, and it seemed hard for her to go on. "They're just nomads."

"What were we then?"

"Travellers," she said, and Jiggy could see her standing beside the matched luggage and the packing cases with which she had first brought him the world.

Over and over during his stay, Clarissa would say to him, "Jiggy, you've no idea how much good you've done me." On their last evening, she put on a long dress, sat on the Empire sofa, ready to receive, and he could have sworn there was an army of ghosts at the door. The pressure seemed overpowering—it was as though they were in a time-capsule. The thrust of his beloved friend was incredible. Anne Knapp was a clumsy saboteur, Rhoda incomparably static in comparison. He and darling Clarissa—could it be that they were in some kind of command module after all?

The next morning when she told him goodbye, she said, "Give my love to Connecticut," and then pressed his arm as subtly as Madame Recamier might have nudged a confidant. "Don't tell Anne Knapp. Don't tell her anything."

# Misalliance

NINA SANDRICH

If ever either legendary  
Fable or historic fact  
Could prove mere mortal man had snared  
A mermaid, wed her (still intact),  
I could accept that it was so.  
What I doubt is his empathy  
For sand on sheets or sympathy  
With time spent in a tub. If he  
Did not demand an intimacy  
Impossible, it still might be  
A small success. I wonder though  
If he could hear without despair  
Year after year her siren song  
Or take the time to sometimes stare  
In her wet eyes or bear to see  
Her combing tangles from her hair?  
I fear before too many months  
Had passed the mortal (mere) would sigh  
For common woman normal-shaped  
With sense enough to age and die,  
With wit to know where something fits.  
“Who wants a half-fish with a whim  
For water?” he would surely cry.  
“She has her tail, so let her swim  
Away. My new-found wife, I find,  
Will walk to bed or run to town!  
I’ll boat that mermaid back to brine;  
She’ll learn to float alone—or drown.”

# Across the Editor's Desk

CRAD KILODNEY

The world loses its hold on us because of giganticness and gothic infusion of chaoticism. The turbulent world we are residual of; is a grace and blessing of tremendous intrepitude and stern consternation of realized dominion.

**I**F YOU don't know what that means, don't worry. I don't either. As a manuscript reader for a book publishing house, I face this sort of thing at least once a day. During my first few weeks on the job, I was puzzled. Understandably so, I think.

But after a while I began to see things differently. Each pile of manuscripts became a bag of goodies. I discovered I had a sweet tooth for such writing and read voraciously in order to satisfy it. With the instinct and appetite of an anteater, I would ferret out that individual sentence or line of dialogue that etched a manuscript into my memory, perhaps forever. And perhaps others can profit from—or at least enjoy—some of this esoteric feast.

Let's start with some sentences. A woman from New York—a graduate of the Famous Writers School—sent us a 715-page novel. One of her chapters began:

Even as powerful tremors can hollow out and split asunder Mother Earth herself, so can invidious emotions and attitudes wreak fierce and disastrous cataclysms upon human-beings with dire mental, physical and psychic consequences, as a result.

Another author offered this sentence in a mammoth science fiction novel:

Valeria had reasoned that the putation of skin-colorings was an acquired characteristic of enviormental conditions of nature's laws of natual selection which

supplemented the gene pigments of the chromosomes egg-cells which in turn may cause a changed condition from any natural disturbances of natures elements, cosmic rays, electronic storms, Atomic, hydrogenic explosions and volcanic disturbances and etc.

A nurse from California sent us a handwritten collection of essays on race relations. One of her opening sentences:

The sediment of experience of the past has been a heritage left to us by the ongoing of time.

The quoted sample at the beginning of this article was written by a self-styled metaphysician from New Jersey. His manuscript also contained this:

Instructions to a student are very gigantic and ominous, but, just as gothicly brevidious. Our and my application of cure-all is conducive, only to the individual of earnest desire, and all that one, desires, conscientiously exact.

**D**IALOGUE also offers its challenges. Here's some conversation between a married couple, taken from a mid-western banker's novel:

"I thought we were through with war after that holocaust concluded five years ago, what with the formation of the U. N. and the horrifying aftermath of the atom bomb" was Herman's comment to Eleanor.

"We can only hope" she replied, "that the assistance which we are to give will be of such power as to bring these aggressors to terms within a short period. We can only hope too, that innocent non-combatants will be spared the destruction such as nuclear warfare brings."

Dialogue may be useful for filling the reader in on background information. In one midwestern attorney's novel, a husband talks about his past to his wife of fourteen years:

"Then, as you know, after we were married I continued my studies with Chicago U as a part-time student, and in three years I got my master's degree. Then, for a year, I took special courses in corporate accounting, and in five years I went to the head of the accounting department of our corporation."

His soliloquy continued for two pages, with his wife occasionally interjecting an observant "It certainly takes a long time to find out why some men do some things."

Whatever neophyte writers' shortcomings may be, imagination and originality are not among them.

One writer submitted a synopsis of a novel in which a gorilla receives the transplanted brain of a Nobel Prize winner and becomes king of the gorillas of the Cameroons.

Another synopsis read:

A woman had a spell put on her; by being pregnant the spell was cast on the baby. The baby was a very beautiful child named Eittah, which was half human and half cobra and had a boy child the same as she. Eittah felt a hate of people. The cellar of there house was a snake pit which she fed people too.

Natural law? To hell with it!

A Famous Writers School grad put her heroine through some remarkable physical feats: "Roma paled, then blushed a fiery red."

Not to be outdone, a man from Idaho wrote that his hero "buried his face in a cup of hot coffee."

An elderly man from Brooklyn topped them all. His tragic hero committed suicide by pointing a gun into his mouth and firing . . . twice.

Another off-beat novel—a spy thriller—was turned in by a teenage boy. In his story, the bad guys' secret headquarters was in a blimp anchored over Missouri. Who would think of looking there?

In a soap opera novel by a man in his seventies, three young people are called by the police to come to the hospital to identify the body of a close friend, mutilated in an auto accident. The identification is positive. Then: "Arch suggested that we go out for hamburgers."

I HARDLY recall a line of the poets I read in school. Some of those we heard from proved more memorable. One poet sent us a printed booklet of his work (12 pages for \$3.00). His first offering began:

Dolores, I love you so much  
That it hurts inside,  
When we're together my love  
For you I cannot hide.  
Dolores, I love you so much, I sure do,  
When I hold you I feel wonderful  
Thru and thru.

A boy from Texas wrote:

The sunlight shatters the silence  
and awakens the glen  
to all the joys of living  
that till now have gone unseen.

Poetic license? This ditty by two college grads from Kansas City has a lot of it:

#### Work

Although life man must work  
Swimming through life as if a Purch.  
Why not be like the shady bum  
Who seems to have a life of peace and calm.

Why must I stay in this situation  
When I'm heavily hit by all taxiation  
Why must I strive to make a dime  
When I don't get satisfaction of the time.

Men have come and some have left  
I wonder why we are still in a heft  
You got to work or society will hollar  
But all they want is the dollar.

Honorable mention goes to the young poetess who wrote:  
"And the frog sits upon my shoe,/Croaking at the sunset and  
my involvement."

**M**ANY neophytes write juveniles. One from a Louisiana lady was called "The Caves of South America." On the third page the boy hero discovers a hidden cave containing the remnants of a lost civilization, replete with "broken cameras, phonographs, compas and radio." The author notes that "they must have communicated with outer planets." The boy discovers a chest of gems, goes home and buys a "crouser" and a "yacathe." Soon after this I lost the thread of the story.

A boy from Texas submitted a handwritten adventure story told in the first person. It began:

It all started about 83 years ago, My father ordered  
a plane to take me to a school in Lebenon, but instead  
of getting there we crashed on a uncharted island.

He was soon joined by the crew of a wrecked ship—three men and two women. Among the aboriginal inhabitants were some headhunters and a gorilla.

We finally thought of a way to get off the island when we found a primitive stones showing how to get off the island. But when we pieced it together it showed how to get on the island not off.

Years later they are rescued, but when they return and see how much the world has changed, they decide that the island isn't so bad after all. They go back and form a separate nation and start an automobile industry. Within 75 years they have a population of 118,076,956 and own an area of land half as big as the U. S. They also win half of Great Britain in a war. The narrator recalls, "I stayed on the island until I died."

A housewife from Chicago described her manuscript in a long inquiry letter:

I assure you there would be a very great demand for my instructive educational teaching type children's Book because nothing like it has ever been published before, furthermore it is the type children's Book that is sorely needed—teaching children to be good boys and girls, and to never be naughty, to never do anything mean or bad they would be ashamed of, to always obey their Mothers and Fathers; why it is necessary for them to eat their daily Vegetables, to say their Prayers, how to appreciate and love Flowers, and to enjoy the beauty of Nature teaching them how to live better and happier lives etc. . . . It is logical that my type instructive educational childrens Book would sell like Wild-fire and would certainly become a best Seller. It is also conceivable that my type childrens Book would also attract a large Foreign Market. We could both make a Fortune.

## NOW about s-e-x.

The neophyte writer finds unusual ways of handling it. Diving valiantly into a lagoon of heavy breathing, groans, shakes and squeezes, he surfaces with lines like, "He pulled her voluminous and willing body to him."

A young army veteran from South Dakota offered this:

Mike and Della went into the bedroom. Mike helped Della out of her clothes and then he undressed. Della was every much a woman as any. She moved her body with a sort of rhythm. Mike could feel her firm breasts against his chest. Her body felt very good. Mike moved

with her as much as he could. They had been in bed several minutes. Della was breathing very hard. Finally it was over with. I like your body Della said Mike. I like being in bed with you said Della. Mike and Della got dressed. I guess I better go to the base said Mike. Mike kissed Della goodnight and left.

Two brothers from New Jersey—both schoolteachers—collaborated to produce this:

Her bikini was wet, she took it off and was just about to reach for a towel when Donald the colored chemist came and there stood the lilliputian pulchritudinous Christine just as nature had intended it to be. Her hair running down the sides of her face painted a beautiful picture, not saying nothing of her temptuous mammaries suspended in space in a gracious pomp position, and Donald looking with great passion at her.

**A**NOTHER species of manuscript we see much of is the religious-metaphysical type, and many of their authors claim such titles as Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Divinity.

If I knew little or nothing about the nuances of the Bible before my job, I soon learned one important axiom: biblical exegesis is trick business. I cite as examples three manuscripts by Bible "scholars" on the subject of UFO's.

The first proposed on the basis of strict biblical evidence that God was an extra-intelligent space man and that he and his cronies directed or manipulated human affairs by staging miracles. Among them were the insemination of Mary with a hypodermic needle by the spaceman-angel Gabriel, a biological expert, and the feeding of five thousand by having the masses lie face-down while a saucer delivered extra food. Also, Christ, God and the other saucerians practiced control of humans by means of an electromagnetic brain manipulator. The author wrote that 'in heaven our angel wings will be a flying saucer and our halo the radiation from our craft.'

The second author offered biblical evidence for his theory that UFO's were instruments of Satan sent to lure unsuspecting humans to his side for the time of the Armageddon. The saucers had their headquarters in a secret valley at the North Pole, whose discovery by Admiral Byrd was hushed up by the U. S. government. The author also gave a detailed description of heaven, and said that it was "quiet and restful." Let us hope so.

The third author viewed the Bible in a yet different light and concluded that UFO's "are harbingers of hope and help for our troubled world." He also stated that the moon has an atmosphere dense enough to burn up meteors, that radio is an example of sound traveling at the speed of light, that the sun is actually cool, and that bumblebees fly by harnessing the "secrets of Cosmic vibration." His most memorable quote: "In the old days men could fly by singing a song and striking a plate."

More on UFO's later. Other religious writers have their feet more firmly on the ground. A Pentecostal minister made this observation:

The rapid breakdown of morality can easily be seen by reading and by looking at our daily newspapers and by looking at the television screens, the magazines, and the naked women on our streets.

I neglected to note his address for future reference.

A self-taught Bible scholar "blessed with the gift of the Holy Ghost at a young age" pulled no punches with this revelation:

If the news media would like to do themselves a favor they would quit telling all the lies about Christmas and repent for telling their children that Santa Claus is going to bring them toys. Saint Nicholas has been dead for many years and is in hell right now.

And I must not forget the elderly clergyman from Indiana who said that the Volstead Act was engineered by Satan.

Many other authors have had a few secret phenomena up their sleeves. Several have spoken and still speak to spirits in the Great Beyond. A few have claimed that God chose our publishing company to put out their books. One author had an archangel named Eric who would provide divine protection in the event that any pressure group attempted to suppress his book. One author claimed to have astrally projected himself to the planet Neptune.

A farmer from North Carolina really surprised us at the end of his autobiography when he sprang this on us without warning:

Bud said I could write about our secret the greatest news of all. For a year space ships have been coming from mars and setting down on the lake. No one have seen them but Bud, Sue, Linda and myself. Each time there have been four little men on it . . . I have took trips with them five times . . . I will bet anyone that I

was the first black man on Mars . . .

The author said that the Martians have a pacifying drug used to correct criminals and that troublesome Earthlings would be brought to Mars for therapy and then returned if cured. A list of fifteen hundred names has been drawn up, including politicians, businessmen and radical students.

A woman from Michigan not only sent us her manuscript, but also put us on her newsletter mailing list. The gist of both the manuscript and the newsletter was that doomsday was imminent, as evidenced by an "accelerating sunspot cycle." The sunspots produced impulses that ultimately controlled every world event from earthquakes to women's fashions. The UFO's were preparing to evacuate those Earthlings who had progressed to the level of "Pre-Being," a state of "higher neutral equilibrium." Included with the lady's manuscript were several photos of flying saucers and one of an entirely human-looking Martian named Floto posing next to an object resembling a gum-ball machine.

UFO buffs do not have a monopoly on the off-beat. A Louisiana farmer sent his shabbily printed booklet, which posed the question, "Why are we on this planet?" The question was never clearly answered, but the author did propose a plan for feeding the world by planting corn in the Amazon valley and also theorized that figs can prevent cancer.

Our previous lady juvenile writer from Louisiana also happened to be an authority on health foods. The first sentence of her health foods manuscript read:

Knowing what to do to replinshe your boody meens  
the difference of staying well and becomming a vege-  
table.

My interest was immediately aroused. I read on and learned:

A nother important factor about your teeth is if the  
bite is wrong your hearing is impaired.

Older people thought they fell and broke their legg.  
Many times their leg broke and then they fell.

Exersize will prevent your heart from rusting  
away.

Replinishing the boody inwouldly and out at the  
same time will correct every condition, including  
serrious.

A man from Baltimore sent us a travelogue of his trip to Yellowstone Park in 1930 . . . with Adolf Hitler.

This is a story about Hitler when he stopped at Yellowstone National Park, when he was on a trip from Baltimore, Maryland to Seattle, Washington, in 1930 . . . By the time we got to Yellowstone National Park, he was telling another boy that we picked up in Chicago and me, that he was going to declare war in a few years . . . He made speeches to some of the people that were at Yellowstone National Park on their vacations and a lot of the people would stop and listen to what he had to say.

As proof, the author enclosed photocopies of post cards he had written to his mother at the time. One of them, bearing a 1930 postal cancellation, read, "Dear Mom, Today we are in Ohio. I am writing this while he drives. Tomorrow we will be in Illinois."

Less bizarre and more benign was a passage in a manuscript on elementary classroom procedures by two retired lady principals. The section was titled "Care of Pencils":

When the pencil is to be used for the first time, the child should be given the opportunity to admire it. As the child holds and looks at the pencil, the teacher calls attention to its length, its color, its smooth, shiny paint, and its dark, round lead. Attention is called to the child's name, which has been put on the pencil. A discussion may follow as to the reason for labelling the pencil with the child's name. At this time the teacher might read the poem "The Unhappy Pencil" by Shirley Hunkins LaCorte. Periodically the pencil may be inspected by the children and the teacher. Praise should be given for the good care the children have taken of the pencils. Discussion may follow and children may decide that the appearance of the pencil after use remains the same, except that it has grown shorter.

Hoo! Boy!

Further insight into the minds and personalities of our "graphomanics" can be gleaned from their letters. Graphomanics, Dr. Rudolf Flesch speculates, comprise two percent of the population. Judging from the letters we get—mostly inquiries—the cross-section is surprisingly non-exclusive. Indeed, when the beaming faces of the Famous Writers School pose the archetypal question, "Do you have a restless urge to write?" some of the unlikeliest people answer, "Yes!"

One man from Toronto sent us a waterlogged, handwritten manuscript on note pad size paper. His cover letter read:

Dear Friend,

Here I send these story I written myself. see If you Love my story Let me know If you Love my story Let me know very soon. Read these story If you don't Love my Story you send back to me I hope that you read my story and you love my storey. I call my story The Lovers Life of Peoples. Let me know soon If you Love my my Story try it.

A man from Chicago wrote:

I've got a nice, dirty, fiction, hippie book in the works.

Here's another:

I have wrote a book. A book about the Government. And what is going on now. That the honest man should know. It toke me from November 1969 to January 4th 1971 to get it wrote . . . It is a 14 page book.

This query from Baltimore turned up on my desk one day:

I have a written composition Holy Bible document to place upon the Holy Bible deep mystery. the Book is small, But not to be added to any other writing, it also is finally . . . I will send a copy of it, for it to be publish. What is your Rules. and Laws. I wish to no. and how must I go about this?

A scrawled letter from a Cleveland woman read in part:  
To home it may consign

I have a very unusual manuscript almost ready. for publication. I am looking for a publisher. at your request I will send you a brief

The title of the manuscript is

"My life in a coffen." (cw) applied)

The most inscrutable inquiry of all came to us from a minuscule town in North Carolina, typed on official stationery:  
GENTLEMEN:

DURING THE PAST 25 YEARS WE HAVE BEEN WORKING ON ATOM LEARN LIVE. WE BELIEVE THE ATOM IS THE GREATEST SUBJECT FOR WRITING ON IN OUR TIME.

WHEN IT IS CONVENIENT WITH EVERY ONE WE WOULD LIKE TO, TALK ABOUT THE GREAT ATOM.

It was signed by the mayor.

Such are the highlights of one year as a literary gourmand. To those readers who are neophyte writers, perhaps this article

has been in some small way helpful. If so, it was unintentional. At least they will have come to know something of the manuscript reader's pleasures. One writer, in a splash of satori, captured the essence perfectly. I leave you with his words:

Across the desk has our labour been, a capitulation of keenness and the research material of the same. I am contemplative of a greater search and research of technical literature, of how to sustain eternal principle of Life. I realize the enthusiasm of God realizing us unto his principle of God manifestation. Love and concern, do our class, of God, and principle, unto this expressed per expression of GOD, statement per sentence, and total realization.

## Colors

KARL KROLOW

Sleepwalking colors.

The red of cheeks calls to mind  
the red of bricks.

A ray of light becomes  
an exotic drawing  
of a blink of an eye.

Secret love of horizon blue  
for the blue of a girl's veins.

A lonely man  
scribbles a shadow to himself  
in front of his feet.

Every yellow knows the story  
of a lemon.

(translated by David Neal Miller)

# The Ohio Poem

MICHAEL CHECCIO

## I

The only bird in the whole  
Of Western Pennsylvania  
Sings in a tree  
At the foot of a blue hill.

When I look up and  
Westward

I see twilight riding down  
The long hills in Ohio  
And spreading itself out  
Over the beautiful black rock.

In a farmhouse not far  
From the border  
A barn owl flutters wildly about  
Caught up in some rafters  
In the roof

And somewhere a small boy  
Laughs and laughs  
Across  
Miles and miles  
Of dark.

When he laughs like that  
It's as though all of Ohio  
Had included me  
In some vast and private joke

## II

It's hard to sing here in Ohio.  
It's a landlocked state.  
No citizens in Steubenville  
Dream of the sea.  
The frontier lies years  
Beyond the farthest border  
And the Moundbuilders have gone  
Leaving only their graves.

When I was a child in Berea, Ohio  
I used to sing a song to myself.  
I'd sing it whenever I was lonely  
Or afraid and somehow  
I would always be comforted.

Today I have forgotten the words.

### III

So I'll have to try to make up my own,  
Give 'em a rhythm,  
Give 'em a rhyme,  
Find the thing a tune  
And sing it aloud  
From the tip of my long pink tongue.

I will try to be happy  
Under the orchard shade,  
Sing in apple-dark light,  
Move with the grace  
Of the silent brown river  
That flows into Ohio night.

### IV

River,  
Dead fish float in your poison  
Blood, their bodies wash up among  
Your garbage, and at night the  
Unwed mothers come, kiss  
Your shores and drown their unwanted babies.

### V

Ohio.  
It means something big.  
The Iroquois used that word.  
Such a strange and savage tongue.

It's true.  
From where I stand in Pennsylvania  
There is nothing over there but open space.

## VI

There must be ten million empty people  
In the whole of that great big state,  
Their eyes as dark  
As the feathers on an owl,  
Their throats choked with its voice.  
I am one of them  
And they are my own  
And we walk the waste covered  
Banks of the rivers.  
Oh Christ it's beautiful  
On this cold November night  
That bears your kiss and your curse.  
All around me in Ohio  
People are raising their arms to fly,  
Beating their wings for warmth.

## VII

Here, in Western Pennsylvania  
All is quiet now. The one bird has taken  
Slow flight across the border  
And set down in a branch of cold pine.

In the distance, all I can see  
Is his small blue dot  
In that one broken tree.

When winter comes  
These hills will go blank with a blank snow.

I would like to rest  
In that fir  
On the Ohio slope,

Sing in its dark green flame.

# Marginalia . . .

(continued)

We have dutifully accepted the advertising world's urging toward conspicuous consumption. Ours has become a throwaway society conditioned to believe in the gospel of built-in obsolescence. We have come to accept shoddy goods and workmanship because no matter how far short the product falls of its advertising claims, we did not really believe those claims anyhow. On the one hand, we are skeptical of all advertising claims; yet on the other, we have swallowed whole the big lie, the underlying message of all advertising: if it doesn't work, you can always get a new one. And wait till you see the new models!

There is something touching about this apparently infinite capacity for hope. Like Gatsby, Americans do indeed believe in the green light. They do believe that tomorrow they will reach out and grasp the dream that has been always just beyond reach. But too often they have believed that the American dream consisted only of the latest model or the newest gadget or fad.

If the last thirty years have proved anything, it is the tiresome truth of the cliche that money can't buy happiness. While most Americans have been using and wasting material and energy resources at unprecedented rates, we have not been what you would call a happy people. We've killed each other on the highways at record rates, fought with our young people, rioted, killed our leaders, and bought more and more guns for "protection." In the midst of our plenty and our galloping consumption (of goods and services, I mean), we've had a sneaky feeling that (a) the other fellow was getting more and (b) it wasn't going to last.

Now it turns out we were right. The other fellow, the oil companies for example, is getting more, and the same fellows who sold us that eight cylinder, air conditioned dinosaur in the driveway are now saying we shouldn't use it, we should take a walk because exercise is good for us. The electric company which wanted us to buy an air conditioner for every room a few years ago is now talking brown-outs and power failures. The party line in Orwell's 1984 did not change any more swiftly than the oil companies' ads.

I find myself of two minds about the whole thing. On the one hand, I think we've been had—again! Once more we're being manipulated like Skinner's pigeons. On the other hand, I see the energy crisis as a refreshing dash of reality in our heretofore absurd existence and the presence of the accompanying

*minor physical sacrifice as necessary and desirable to bring out some of the better, less materialistic traits of America. Let me explain. I think the present gasoline and oil shortage is largely a fake, designed and manipulated for the sake of profit. But nevertheless, the energy crisis is an ultimate reality; it is the height of fantasy to believe we can go on forever using 50% of the world's energy reserves and never running out, no matter how huge our cars or how many we own. If 1974 frightens us into thinking realistically about new energy sources and about re-evaluating our philosophy of trying to realize the American Dream in terms of "bigger," "faster," and "more—always more," it may be a happier new year than it appears from this chilly 65 degree office.*

—J.J.K.



## CONTRIBUTORS

**S**TEVEN ALLABACK teaches English at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His fiction has also appeared in *Prairie Schooner*. IRA D. SHAFFER is a graduate student at Ohio University. A graduate of La Salle College, he is making his first appearance here. T. ALAN BROUGHTON has been a regular contributor to this and numerous other magazines. He is a member of the English department at the University of Vermont. CHARLES EDWARD EATON also has been a valued contributor over the years. The current story is part of his third collection, now in preparation. A *Sewanee Review* story of his was reprinted in the *O. Henry Prize Stories of 1972*. His poems have appeared often in these pages and more recently in the pages of *Harper's Magazine*. He is now at work on his sixth collection of poems. CRAD KILODNEY, you will be surprised to learn, is a pseudonym. The author is an American expatriate now living in Toronto. His satirical pieces have appeared in the *National Lampoon*, the *Carolina Quarterly*, *Fiction*, *Quartet*, and elsewhere. Of his modest success he will say only, "I owe it all to prayer, sunflower seeds, and regular oil changes." KARL KROLOW is one of the leading postwar poets in Germany and a recipient of the Georg-Buechner-Preis. His translator, DAVID NEAL MILLER, is a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Santa Cruz. MICHAEL CHECCIO is a reporter with the Atlantic City *Press*. His poems have appeared in *Spirit*. LEONARD BASKIN's work appears in many public and private collections both here and abroad. He teaches at Smith College and lives in Northampton, Massachusetts.

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